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THE TEACHER, THE MIDDLE CLASS, THE LOWER CLASS.

BY- TENENBAUM, SAMUEL

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THIS ARTICLE DISCUSSES THE APPARENTLY UNBREACHABLE SOCIOECONOMIC GAP BETWEEN UPPER-MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILIES AND WELFARE FAMILIES WHO LIVE ON ONE BLOCK IN THE WEST SIDE OF MANHATTAN. IN THIS CONTEXT THE ARTICLE CHALLENGES THE MIDDLE-CLASS ORIENTATION OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "PHI DELTA KAPPAN," VOLUME 45, NUMBER 2, NOVEMBER 1963. (LB)

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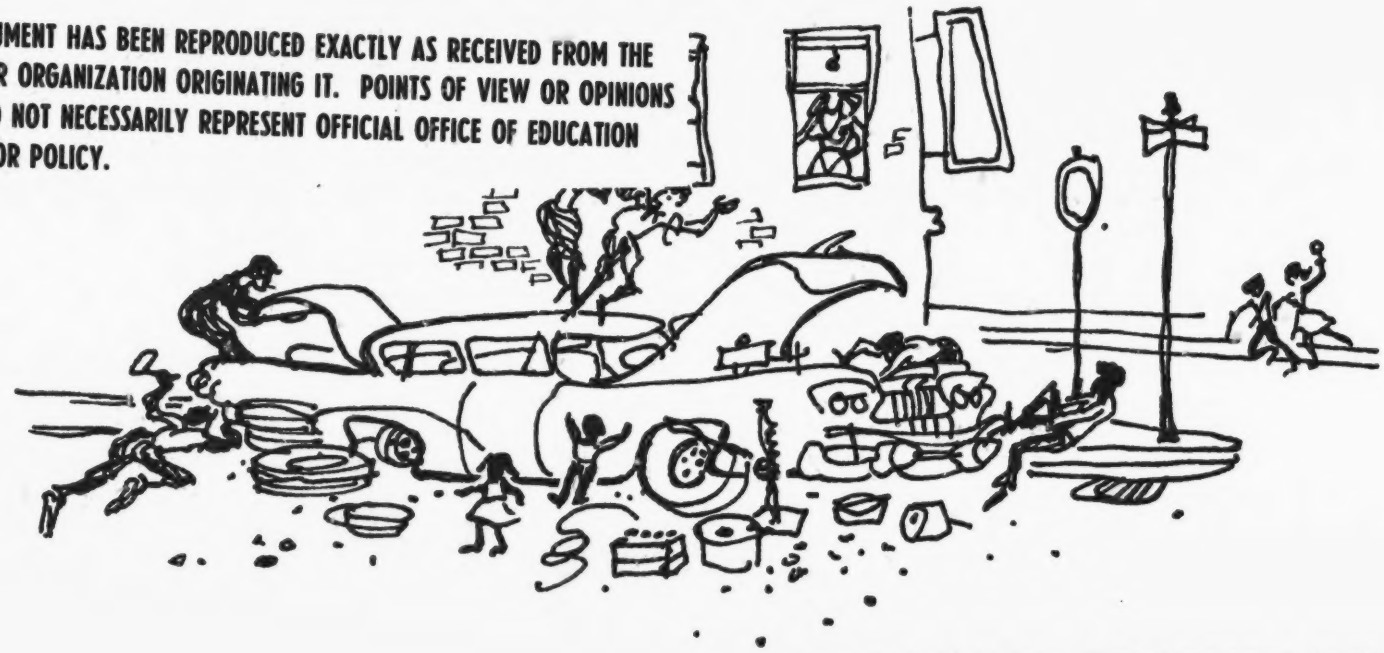

By SAMUEL TENENBAUM

# The Teacher, The Middle Class, The Lower Class

I LIVE on the West Side of Manhattan in a rather solid middle-class house with doorman and all. My neighbors have been complaining for a long time that the neighborhood has been running down. But the building I live in has held like a bastion, a strong fifteen-story fortress. My neighbors felt safe and protected once within its high walls, until a hotel on the opposite side of the street began to be used by the city relief agency to house indigent families. The hotel, a great affair, once magnificient, in bygone days probably catered to people of substance. This is the way, I suppose, of an American city. It represents the great human flow and ebb, the tidal waves of a dynamic culture that pushes people and fortunes around endlessly.

But this is not really my story. I meant to speak of how these lower-class people affected us, the middle-class people in our house; and what I myself learned in terms of my own feelings as a teacher. If I am a little roundabout, forgive me.

First of all, in what seemed almost overnight (and in actuality was not more than a month), this once great hotel was seething with life and ferment and energy. This comparatively quiet block took on all the aspects of a slum block and some of the aspects of a perpetual carnival. Hordes of children, like milling cattle, cluttered the once empty street; children of all ages, from one year to—well, they looked like eighteen and twenty. Boys and girls mixed in packs, and it was difficult to think of them as single, individual children. They shouted, they screamed, they pushed, they fought. In the midst of play, they would suddenly get into individual fights and collective fights. Violence, aggression, play, and friendliness seemed all mixed up. Every wall on the block was used, either to play ball on or to throw things on. The streets became cluttered with debris, especially broken glass. Where they got all the glass to break is beyond me. The area around this hotel became one vast accumulation of litter. Also, it was quite common for children to throw things from the windows at passersby. The parents apparently did not object, for I never saw a parent reprimand a child for this. The children resembled an uncontrolled, undisciplined herd, doing what they wished, with neither mother nor father in sight to curb, admonish, or chastise. In fact, when these lower-class children moved in, some of the motherly women in our building occasionally attempted to discipline a child, invariably with

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frightening results. A cluster of febrile humanity arose like spontaneous combustion to repel the invader, and these well-intentioned women felt lucky if they escaped unharmed. Such incidents only increased my neighbors' sense of helplessness and fear. In the end, my middle-class neighbors, through painful experience, learned to look on aloofly and distantly as children of six and seven smoked and young boys and girls openly engaged in physical contact. Attracted by such scenes, almost glued to them, these neighbors of mine expressed by bodily demeanor and by speech their shock and disapproval.

The parents of the children themselves acted strangely. In all states of undress, they hung out of windows, while below mixed adult groups, and groups including children, congregated, drinking beer, joshing, pushing each other about and carrying on in a merry and boisterous way through all hours of the night.

The tenants of our building, guarded more carefully than ever by doormen, made it a point never to loiter outside (which seemed to them a confession of idleness and lack of industry). They were in the habit of going in and out of the building with scarcely anyone seeing or hearing them; they were quiet, inconspicuous, and rarely communicated with neighbors, even though they may have lived together for a quarter of a century.

In contrast, the welfare families lived outside, on the street, conspicuously, loudly, openly. Their social life centered almost exclusively around those who happened to live in the same building. That did not mean it was a serene kind of neighborliness. We never knew when a fist fight or some loud fracas would start and it was not unusual for the occupants of our building to be awakened by a horrible commotion—even the firing of bullets—at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. Some of my neighbors were infuriated by such behavior and indignantly called the police, demanding that something be done immediately.

There was one type of behavior, however, that affected my neighbors beyond all others. I cannot say that they liked to see children smoking or engaged in open sex play; it violated their sense of morality. But they could somehow stand that. What they couldn't stand, what frightened them, was the violent, hostile way in which lower-class families found their amusement. An almost palpable atmosphere of aggression and violence hovered over the street. The children would attack an automobile—literally attack it as locusts attack a field—climb on top of it, get inside, and by combined, co-operative effort shake and tug until they left it a wreck. The older men would strip the tires from a car and sell them. A three-wheeled delivery bicycle from a local merchant provided a special holiday. The children gathered from nowhere and everywhere, piled on the delivery bicycle, and drove it up and down the street loaded down with humanity. When they made no dent in the vehicle by this misuse, in disgust they poked at it and pushed it in an effort to make it come apart. I have never seen young people work so assiduously as they did riding, pushing, and shaking the cart. They didn't give up until it was completely destroyed. I have seen children, several of whom could not have been more than seven or eight years old, at this job of destruction past 10 p.m.; and they all appeared to be having the merriest time. Even their innocent, friendly play was violent. Suddenly, strong, tall, gangling adolescent boys would dash pell-mell down the street, like stampeding cattle, shrieking and screaming, pushing, shoving, mauling each other.

Of course, this hotel where they lived was not meant for families with many children. Since it was enormous in size, at least fifteen stories high, it probably represented the most concentrated slum of all times, greater than could possibly prevail in Harlem. You might say as I did: "What can you expect? Children have to play. Here they are growing up without a mother, or a mother who never seems to make her presence felt, like animals, without love or warmth, pushing out for some sort of life on the street. Are not these unfortunate children more sinned against than sinning?"

So I spoke to my neighbors. Yet I knew that was not the whole truth. Nearby, within a few blocks, were two magnificent parks: Riverside Drive and Central Park. There they could have green fields and space and freedom. Yet none made a move to play there. Although I believe I understand many other facets of their conduct, this aspect remains a mystery I cannot fathom.

BROADLY, this gives you some notion of what happened to a quiet, respectable block when invaded by the lower classes. What happened to my neighbors? First there was general, immediate, universal consternation and some took direct action. Posthaste some moved out; they wouldn't live, they said, with such trash. A second group remained. This group didn't mind the shenanigans, the broken glass, the commotion, but they experienced an awful fear of personal attack. Many of them became so frightened by the invaders that they stayed home at night. The sense of physical peril was probably the most frightening and demoralizing aspect of the situation, though I never heard of anyone being molested or attacked.

There was a great deal of damage to parked cars, and we soon learned to avoid that side of the street. It was peculiar to see the gaping empty spaces near the hotel curb, when all around were cars choking for an inch of space.

After the first shock had passed, the tenants of our building took action. The middle class is not without power, which it exercises in its own way (generally of course polite, proper, and without violence). A committee got up a petition and collected signatures asking that a policeman be stationed on our street twenty-four hours a day. A tenant with political connections began to put them to work. I hear that the matter has reached the mayor himself, and that the welfare agency plans to remove families with children from the hotel since, after the petition, the Powers-That-Be agreed that it is an improper place for them.

But these lower-class people are still across the street and the fear remains. Even worse, my middle-class neighbors are convinced that these new people are trash, some monstrous excretion of mankind, a lower order of animal, apart from the human species. So long as such attitudes persist, these unfortunate newcomers—poverty-stricken, ignorant, addicted to vice, drink, violence, and brutality—will never be understood in terms of what causes such living: their bleak, helpless, and hopeless state, their lack of identity and purpose. My middle-class neighbors will piously continue to stay aloof, judging them; and this judgmental attitude itself makes the gulf wider. It is inconceivable that our middle-class house will ever join in friendship or good will to these lower-class invaders.

WHAT I was witnessing had enormous meaning for me as a student of education and as one who teaches future teachers. I thought I knew the problem of the lower-class student; it is all explained in the textbook. Like other instructors, I have discussed the problem in polite, academic terms. But this experience made me see clearly and vividly, as nothing else has, how far-fetched and remote is our present school system for these children—in philosophy, methodology, approach, values, and meaning.

In contrast to the lower-class children, how preciously kept is each child in our house; how carefully clothed; how carefully guarded; how often admonished by parents, grandparents, relatives, and friends. In the elevator, the icy tone of the father to his seven-year-old son: "Is that hat glued on to your head, John?" How quickly and politely that hat comes off. How often are they shown pride and love. "My son is the valedictorian of his class. He plans to go to Harvard, get his Ph.D., and teach chemistry." Even our doorman, hard and brusque and violent with lower-class children, takes on a different tone and manner with the building children; to them he is gentle and tender and protective. The children themselves for the most part are loving and lovable. As they imbibe attention and love, as these qualities are poured into them, they have them to give out. If at times the children become rambunctious, the doorman finds it sufficient to threaten them with parental disclosure and they fall in line. There is no discipline problem. From infancy on, they experience discipline.

These children have pride and are conscious of family position. Even if you are a stranger, they will inform you that their father, a lawyer, is involved in some famous current trial; or he has been called to Washington on an important mission; or that their father or grandfather owns this well-known establishment or business. And they tell you with equal pride what they themselves plan to be; and they act as if they have already achieved it and have a right to all the honors thereof.

On school holidays our building takes on a festive air as the children come home from out-of-town schools and colleges. You see a little boy with a ramrod figure sporting a magnificent uniform; he attends a military academy. Parents take special pride in introducing children all around. For these holidays parents have a well-planned schedule—theaters, lunches downtown, visiting and inter-visiting, parties that their children give and parties that they go to. The building is full of young people coming and going; it is really most pleasant and exciting.

Yes, the children in this middle-class building are solicitously nurtured. Just as the parents seem to have purpose and direction for themselves, so the children seem also to have imbibed purpose and direction. Some of them, still in elementary school, speak of college and careers. Coming home in the afternoon, they hold their books tightly and neatly; for it is obvious that for them books represent important and powerful tools for the future.

What a stark contrast are these children on the opposite side of the street! These children seem to have no purpose, no objective; they seem to live for the moment, and the big objective is to make this moment pass away as amusingly and excitingly as possible. And no matter what, they seem a lot more bored and idle than the middle-class children. They hang around, in gangs or small groups, and in boredom they poke at one another or get into mischief; they are ready for any or everything, but mostly nothing happens and

there they are, hanging around in idleness.

Even when playing near the house, the children in our building go to the parks already referred to, and they participate in organized games, or if not, they telephone to a friend or friends to meet and play together. In contrast, the children on the opposite street have many of the characteristics of neglected alley cats, growing up in a fierce, hostile jungle. The children from the two sides of the street never mix. Since the invasion of this new element, the children in our building are more closely supervised than ever; they are so apart in thinking and feeling that functionally they are like two different species.

As I saw these two groups first-hand, I understood how easily middle-class children fit conventional school systems; how almost from infancy they have been trained for the role of a good, conforming member of this institution; and how easily and naturally their middle-class teachers would respond with understanding and affection.

Also, I could see how wrong, how incongruous and meaningless this school was for lower-class children; how their very being was an irritant to it, and it to them; how ill-prepared they were for the demands of the school; how what they were and how they lived would elicit from their middle-class teachers scorn, resentment, rejection, hostility, and—worst of all—how these children would create in their teachers fear, a physical, sickening fear, as thirty or forty of them crowded together in one room hour after hour, day after day. This was the most demoralizing feature of all. For once fear sets in, you can no longer understand, appreciate, or help; what you want is distance, separation, safety; or if this is impossible, you want the backing of superior strength or a counter fear; and one cannot educate or help another human being through force or fear.

As I thought of what was happening to my block, I was astonished to realize how in nearly all respects our teachers respond to lower-class children just as my house neighbors do. They cannot understand their idleness, their purposelessness, their lack of ambition. They regard such traits as some congenital evil. Like my neighbors, they are indignant and shocked by their sexual frankness, and are astonished and chagrined by parental indifference to children's progress in school. When parents do come to school they may even side with the child against the teacher. Like my neighbors, teachers remain in a perpetual state of fear of these children, at their acting out, their defiance of discipline, their destructiveness and vandalism. "Look at what they did!" a teacher will say, pointing to a desk ripped open or shattered panes of glass, speaking as if some holy altar had been violated. Looking at these lower-class children distantly, unapprovingly, and judgmentally, as my neighbors did, many teachers feel trapped, frightened, helpless. Like my neighbors, when a child gets into trouble with the law, they often take a smug satisfaction in the tragedy, as if their original judgment had been vindicated. "I knew he would come to a bad end." Middle-class virtue is written all over them.

A GOOD case can be and has been made that the only purpose of our educational system is to inculcate middle-class values, to create a middle-class person; and its purpose is not at all to transmit knowledge and subject matter. If this is true, and I am beginning to feel that it is, the main task of our schools, to repeat, is to train children in the proprieties, the conventions, the manners, the sexual restraints, the respect for private property of the middle class; and also to promote such middle-class virtues as hard work; sportsmanship, and ambition—especially ambition. The aim becomes to create a gentleman, a person striving for high achievement, so that he can attain the middle-class ideal: money, fame, a lavish house in the suburbs, public honors, etc.

I now perceive more clearly why lower-class children are such problems in school, why they do so poorly, why they are so alien to this institution, why they stand out like sore thumbs. Bluntly put, they don't fit in at all with what the schools and teachers demand, want, and expect.

I now understand why even bright lower-class children do not do nearly as well in school as middle-class children of equal and even lower ability; why bright lower-class children drop out of school even when intellectually capable of doing the work. They never feel part of the institution, their school is not theirs, their team is not theirs, their classmates are not theirs.

Just as the children in my building did not mix with the children on the hotel side of the block, so they do not mix in school. But here in school middle-class children are on home ground; it is *their* school, *their* teachers, *their* clubs, *their* team, *their* classmates. Parents of lower-class children also feel strange and remote from the institution, frightened by its conventions. Sometimes a lower-class child, through the influence of some good, loving, middle-class person, generally a teacher, begins to aspire to middle-class status. The parents, instead of reinforcing middle-class values, may resent these new feelings in the child and fear that he is being alienated from them; they will try to keep the child in their own class. I know a fine and able

student who applied for a scholarship and was accepted by a prestige college. Her father, a laborer, was incensed at the whole idea. We were turning his daughter's head. A good girl should get a job, come home, help her mother, and get married. When he was told that college and marriage are not incompatible, he showed every doubt that the two go together. Then he took another tack. Deep study in college, he said, affects the head, and his daughter had fragile health; he didn't want her to become rattle-brained. Finally, he trotted out his last argument: he wasn't going to have his daughter gallivanting off and mixing with those snobs and good-for-nothings. The father won out.

It also happens, undoubtedly with greater frequency in America than in any other major culture, that a lower-class child does break out of his group to enter the middle class. A play, "The Corn Is Green," deals with this theme. It is the true account of a Welsh boy whose teacher, Miss Cooke, out of dedication and devotion, held the youth steadfast in his studies. After many trials, the young man passed his examinations and won an Oxford scholarship. The son of a nursemaid and a seaman, he became an eminent playwright, actor, and director, and, incidentally, the author of "The Corn Is Green."

It sometimes happens that a member of the middle class will flunk out of his class also, although this is quite rare, as a review of your own experience will indicate. Middle-class parents will go to any extreme to save their children for middle-class status. How would an eminent and respected professional person regard his son who worked as a janitor or as a laborer, although the young man might be quite happy with his work and the work right for him? Middle-class parents attempt all kinds of shenanigans to keep their offspring in their class. We all know of the student who fails at a good university, whereupon the parents find a mediocre school where he can obtain the degree. The parents rejoice, for the boy is now a college graduate; he has achieved middle-class status and need not disgrace the family.

I AM beginning to feel that if we want to help lower-class children we will have to reorient our thinking and philosophy. We will have to adopt fundamental reforms, radical and crucial in nature, so that the school as an institution will be more nearly in conformity with the cultural and behavioral patterns of this class. I am beginning to think that it might be best if we would enlist in this task the more able and brighter lower-class members, with the hope that they will be better able to cope with the lower-class child. Little good can come to any child when a teacher relates to him with fear and condemnation.

What has long been a national fetish, almost religious in fervor, is the effort to shape all children, regardless of their state or condition, in the middle-class mold. It would appear that the chief end of man is to glorify the middle class. When teachers fail at this task, they regard themselves and the school as failures. I believe that until now we have done a remarkable job in converting this "melting pot" material into a sort of middle-class stew, although frequently of questionable taste and quality.

I raise this question: Should all people strive to become middle-class? Hasn't our middle-class culture produced a society with more than its share of tensions, anxieties, neuroses, and psychoses? How many souls have been blighted, twisted, and distorted by its impossible demands! Middle-class culture, it is true, stresses ambition and achievement, but does it not leave altogether too many of us feeling and thinking of ourselves as failures, even when we have striven mightily and have done our best? And how many, after high achievement, still feel discontented, unhappy, striving ever higher? For there is no end goal to achievement; the goal is almost by definition unattainable. As a clinical psychologist who has seen men and women in travail, I can only say that I have nothing but sympathy for the middle-class child; the demands made on him by parents and his sub-culture are often unbearable. I think of him as frequently caught in a vortex, the victim of uncontrollable forces, so strong that they may destroy him.

In our sanctimonious way, we have assumed that this, our middle-class culture, represents the best of all possible worlds. We have never examined lower-class culture with the view of asking: Is there perhaps something in another way of life to alleviate our own sickness? Like my house neighbors, we have regarded every deviation with moral condemnation. Even if all these feelings about middle-class values are right, even if we should continue to force lower-class children into middle-class molds, shouldn't we recognize that for some children this can never be achieved? It isn't for them, as a duck isn't for running a race with a rabbit. In this world isn't there a need and an honorable place for carpenters, plumbers, and, yes, laborers? Aren't we doing infinite harm to children by our insistence that they be something they cannot be, and then making them feel like failures because they have not achieved what they cannot achieve? Wouldn't it be better if we found out what they *can* be, and then set about changing our schools so that we can help them, not to become middle-class, but to become the best selves they are capable of becoming?